Methodist Healthcare Ministries
OF SOUTH TEXAS, INC.
"Serving Humanity to Honor God"

House Committee on Public Education

Interim Charge 2: Identify Existing Barriers to Digital Learning for Texas Children & Evaluate Digital Learning Marketplace and Effectiveness of TIMA

Written testimony submitted by:

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Chair Huberty, and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information regarding digital learning in Texas. My name is Christine Yanas; I serve as the Vice President of Policy & Advocacy for Methodist Healthcare Ministries of South Texas, Inc.

A brief background on Methodist Healthcare Ministries. We are a private, faith-based, 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization dedicated to increasing access to health care for uninsured and low-income Texas families through direct clinical services, community partnerships and strategic grant-making in 74 counties spanning the Rio Grande Valley and South Texas. Created in 1995, we are a half owner of 10 Methodist Hospitals – nine in San Antonio and one in Atascosa County. Through our partnership with HCA Healthcare, Methodist Healthcare Ministries provides the local governance for the Methodist Healthcare System to ensure that the healthcare needs of the community are served. On an annual basis, Methodist Healthcare Ministries manages an estimated $125 million budget to operate its primary care clinics and fund more than 90 community partners.

My submitted testimony, on behalf of Methodist Healthcare Ministries, focuses on supporting state leaders in identifying gaps and barriers related to the digital divide in Texas, and providing available resources and recommendations in accomplishing this goal.

Respectfully, we offer the following points for the committee's consideration:

Interim Charge 2 – Identify Existing Barriers to Digital Learning for Texas Children & Evaluate Digital Learning Marketplace and Effectiveness of TIMA

Existing Barriers to Digital Learning in Texas
Due to school closures and suspension of in-person instruction in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual learning programs and policies have been developed at an accelerated rate and are crucial in ensuring that students are educated in a safe manner. Unfortunately, the pandemic has highlighted the "digital divide" in Texas and across the nation.

There are several barriers to providing a digital learning environment for all children, but the primary issue currently impacting students – especially during the pandemic – is that of connectivity. Connectivity issues observed during the pandemic resulted in a joint effort between Governor Greg Abbott, Texas Education Agency (TEA), and Dallas ISD to launch Operation Connectivity "to address the lack of high speed internet and/or home laptops for many DISD students which caused an interruption to their learning."[i] Since then, Operation Connectivity has

become a statewide initiative to address Texas student connectivity. As of this month, TEA has acquired 766,288 keyboarded devices and 480,968 WiFi hotspots through the initiative.[ii]

Connectivity has been a long withstanding issue, especially in rural communities. With approximately 67%[iii] of Texas being categorized as rural, a solution to statewide broadband and device connectivity is critical to both immediately address the coronavirus pandemic and develop long-term resilience in these communities.

Evaluation of the Current Competitive Marketplace for Blended Learning Products
Currently, the competitive marketplace for electronic devices needed for virtual learning is suffering from shortages due to the pandemic and federal sanctions.[iv] Increased demands for such devices for businesses and personal use have exacerbated the shortage and backorders for schools. In addition, shortages of devices such as Chromebooks and other inexpensive PCs pose an additional issue for school districts whose budgets cannot afford to purchase other available devices for student use.

Without these devices, students and school districts cannot access or utilize available software, training, and other necessary resources.

Evaluation of Effectiveness of TIMA and Inclusion of Funded Programs and Initiatives
Given the circumstances of Texas' digital learning efforts, the Technology and Instructional Materials Allotment (TIMA) is not an effective program in addressing the issue of connectivity. TIMA's funded programs, initiatives, and provided resources cannot be used to help bridge the digital divide.

While TIMA may be able to provide computer software and coursework, online services and other resources accessed via the internet,[v] the program cannot fund broadband expansion efforts nor the procurement of devices for student, faculty, or staff use.

Without the means to access resources provided by TIMA, the existence of such programs and initiatives are irrelevant and cannot further a digital learning environment for all students.

Question I – Broadband Coverage Mapping and Resources

Broadband coverage maps are imperative to decision making related to broadband access. Without accurate coverage maps, many unserved households will continue to fall through the cracks. Organizations such as Connected Nation – Texas and Texas Rural Funders have partnered to develop broadband coverage maps which can be accessed here.

Darker green areas on these coverage maps denote detailed granular data that provides a more accurate insight into broadband coverage within a specific county. Lighter green areas denote FCC coverage maps that use census block data to identify coverage. This method of coverage mapping is problematic – e.g., only one household with broadband access in a census block is needed to consider an area as being "covered" – which results in a map that overstates broadband access.

Connected Nation – Texas' State Maps highlight where broadband is both available and unavailable as well as their respective speeds and available technologies. Their County Maps indicate broadband access in all Texas counties. There are also multiple maps available for different broadband speeds. As a reminder, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) defines broadband as having a minimum speed of 25/3 Mbps but is subject to change.[vi] It

should also be noted that this speed is only sufficient to run three to five devices in a household, with some reports stating that the definition can have a negative impact on broadband access efforts.[vii] Interactive Maps allow for the use of layers that are especially useful in decision making. Features include the ability to observe broadband access density in an ISD to determine which students would require paper homework packets as virtual learning is not possible. Broadband Statistics provide coverage map data in a column chart format.

House Bill 1960 by Representative Four Price, passed during the 86th Legislative Session, established the Governor's Broadband Development Council. Members of the Council are charged with investigating best practices for the statewide expansion of broadband access. Currently, the Council is developing their yearly report to State leadership. During the Council's September 24th meeting, they disclosed that the report will include recommendations to create a State Broadband Office and State Broadband Plan, both of which are crucial in developing and executing a state broadband framework that is required to access millions in federal funding.[viii]

The Governor's Broadband Development Council receives state and federal program updates as well as presentations related to broadband which offer invaluable information and resources to most effectively expand broadband access. Those resources can be accessed here.

I would also recommend to the Committee to utilize the following resources from our partner, the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas: Connecting Communities During COVID-19: A Quick Guide to Broadband Solutions for Local Governments; Preparing Workers for the Expanding Digital Economy; Promising Telehealth Initiatives Highlight the Need to Close Digital Divide; and Closing the Digital Divide: A Framework for Meeting CRA Obligations.

Question II – ISP Plans & Action to Close the Digital Divide During COVID-19 Pandemic

On March 13, 2020, FCC Chairman Ajit Pai launched the Keep Americans Connected Initiative that included a pledge telecommunication and internet service providers (ISP) could take to ensure that Americans did not lose access to these critical services during the pandemic. Before expiring in June, more than 800 companies and associations had taken the pledge.[ix]

In response to the pandemic, ISPs across the country have taken action to provide broadband access such as offering free and reduced fees for broadband service, eliminating data caps, and establishing free WiFi hotspots in school parking lots.[x]

Connected Nation – Texas also lists available ISP community programs in Texas.

While these actions have been helpful to some during these trying times, they are by no means sufficient replacements for a long-term, statewide broadband solution. In addition to being extremely short-lived initiatives, they do not increase permanent access in unserved areas.

Recommendation:

The Committee should utilize available resources from organizations working to expand broadband in Texas when developing solutions and policy to provide digital learning to all students.

Resources provided by TIMA, while valuable, are not effective in addressing Texas' connectivity issue which is the primary barrier to digital learning in both home and school settings. It is not recommended to utilize the program as it stands in developing connectivity solutions.

The current climate of the marketplace for devices needed to access digital learning programs and resources, necessitates State action to ensure that schools are not further negatively impacted by device shortages due to cost barriers. Without such action, the digital divide would only be widened.

Broadband coverage maps are important tools in decision-making related to broadband access expansion efforts. However, their inaccuracy is known to result in communities remaining unserved. It is recommended that the Committee take into consideration input and resources from organizations such as Connected Nation Texas, Texas Rural Funders, and the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas which have developed accurate Texas broadband maps and access expansion resources.

Furthermore, the Committee should consider collaboration with the Governor's Broadband Development Council and offer support for State leadership to establish a State Broadband Office and State Broadband Plan.

Thank you for your time and consideration of these comments and recommendations. If you have any questions or if we may provide further information, please contact me at (210)-253-3523 or cyanas@mhm.org

Respectfully submitted,

Christine Yanas
Vice President of Policy & Advocacy

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[i] "Governor Abbott, TEA, Dallas ISD Launch Operation Connectivity Statewide." *Office of the Governor | Greg Abbott*, 8 May 2020, gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-tea-dallas-isd-launch-operation-connectivity-statewide.

[ii] "Operation Connectivity Update", *TEA* | September 14, 2020, https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/business/Boardpacket-Sept.pdf

[iii] Texas Department of State Health Services. "Definitions of County Designations." *Texas Department of State Health Services*, 29 Apr. 2020, https://www.dshs.texas.gov/chs/hprc/counties.shtm.

[iv] "U.S. Schools Face Shortage of Laptops Crucial for Online Learning amid Pandemic." *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 24 Aug. 2020, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/distance-learning-laptop-shortage-remote-virtual-education/

[v] "Technology and Instructional Materials Allotment (TIMA)." *TCEA*, 19 June 2018, tcea.org/advocacy/tima/.

[vi] Zimmer, Jameson, "The FCC 'Broadband' Definition Has Changed. Here Is What It Means." *Broadband Now*, 25 July 2020, broadbandnow.com/report/fcc-broadband-definition/.

[vii] Falcon, Ernesto. "The American Federal Definition of Broadband Is Both Useless and Harmful." *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, 17 July 2020, https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2020/07/american-federal-definition-broadband-both-useless-and-harmful?mc_cid=e2496a168b&mc_eid=7baefb8a20.

[viii] "Key Elements of State Broadband Programs." *The Pew Charitable Trusts*, 26 May 2020, https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2020/05/key-elements-of-state-broadband-programs.

[ix] "Keep Americans Connected." *Federal Communications Commission*, 8 July 2020, https://www.fcc.gov/keep-americans-connected.

[x] "Companies Have Gone Above and Beyond the Call to Keep Americans Connected During Pandemic." *Federal Communications Commission*, 10 Sept. 2020, https://www.fcc.gov/companies-have-gone-above-and-beyond-call-keep-americans-connected-during-pandemic.